
INTRODUCTION

Like many states across the nation, New Jersey has been impacted by the emergence of criminal street gangs. Criminal street gangs have been a major concern for New Jersey's citizens and law enforcement community for more than a decade. In the early 1990s, the New Jersey State Commission of Investigation (SCI) recognized the threat posed by criminal street gangs and made the first attempt to quantify the scope of gang activity in New Jersey. The SCI's public hearings and assessment on criminal street gangs called attention to the issue and prompted policy makers to contemplate broader solutions to the problem.

In response to the growing realization of the challenge posed by gangs and the violence associated with them, the Department of Law and Public Safety (DLPS) developed an *overall statewide strategy* to deal with the issue. In October 1993, the Attorney General announced DLPS policy on street gangs in a document entitled the **"Youth Gang Initiative,"** which set forth two overriding goals:

to control existing youth gangs while disrupting their capacity to engage in criminal activity; and

to prevent the expansion of gang culture and gang identification among New Jersey's young people.

The Youth Gang Initiative acknowledged that these two goals could best be accomplished by the concerted action of **both** law enforcement and the communities they serve.

Following the release of the *"Youth Gang Initiative,"* a Street Gang Unit was created within the New Jersey State Police (NJSP) in January 1994. The unit's mission: *to promote the participation of all New Jersey law enforcement and prosecuting agencies in the creation of a multi-jurisdictional response to the state's gang problem.* Since that time, the members of the NJSP Street Gang Unit (subsequently expanded and renamed the Street Gang Bureau) have faithfully pursued that mission, supporting the state's anti-gang initiative by partnering with other law enforcement agencies to provide training, share intelligence, and investigate gang-related crimes.

By late 2000, considerable progress had been made in these areas. Still, the public at large and policy makers had unanswered questions about gangs. For instance, how many gangs and gang members are present in New Jersey? Where are they located throughout the state? Which gangs are the largest? Which gangs pose the greatest threat? What types of crimes are gangs involved in? Many in law enforcement had a strong working knowledge of the dimensions of the gang problem in their jurisdiction and possibly in the surrounding towns or county, but an overall statewide perspective was lacking. Moreover, policy makers required a more comprehensive look at the issue in order to make informed decisions about how to allocate resources and craft appropriate legislation.

In early 2001, representatives from the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) requested the assistance of the NJSP in assessing the scope of the state's gang problem. In response, the NJSP Intelligence Services Section conducted a statewide survey of law

enforcement, and presented the findings to the Attorney General, OAG staff, representatives from the Division of Criminal Justice (DCJ), the Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC), the Department of Corrections (DOC), all 21 county prosecutors' offices and the Newark Field Division of the FBI.

Conducting surveys that measure law enforcement's perception of the problem of street gangs has certain limitations. In a sense, it is an attempt to quantify a problem that defies strict enumeration; it is nearly impossible to conduct a "census" of gang members and describe the range of criminal activities they commit. Surveys, assessments and gang intelligence databases are useful in providing much-needed strategic information concerning law enforcement's knowledge of gang activity, but these collection efforts can never provide a complete measure of the type, magnitude, and geographic distribution of gang-related crime.

Attempts have been made to address the shortcomings of existing resources that are used to measure gang activity. In the past few years, state legislators have introduced bills that would require New Jersey's law enforcement officers to report the occurrence of all gang-related incidents². Those bills have not yet been adopted or enacted. Thus, presently, New Jersey does not have a systematic means for tracking the number of gang-related incidents that occur statewide.

In this context, and in light of repeated requests for statistical information about gangs, the members of the Street Gang Bureau believed that undertaking a statewide gang survey in 2004 was still a relevant endeavor. The goals for this survey were to increase the response rate from municipalities in the state and to compare the results of the 2004 survey to the 2001 findings to determine what, if anything, had changed about perception of gang activity in the state.

While the term "gang" can have many different meanings, even within the law enforcement community, the definition used for the 2004 Survey is the one provided New Jersey Criminal Code (2C:44-3(h)). Therefore, 'gang', 'street gang' or 'criminal street gang' means:

three or more persons associated in fact. Individuals are associated in fact if (1) they have in common a group name or identifying sign, symbol, tattoo or other physical marking, style of dress or use of hand signs or other indicia of association or common leadership, and (2) individually or in combination with other members of a criminal street gang while engaging in gang related activity, have committed, conspired or attempted to commit, within the preceding three years, two or more offenses of robbery, carjacking, aggravated assault, assault, aggravated sexual assault, sexual assault, arson, burglary, kidnapping, extortion, or a violation of chapter 11, section 3, 4, 5, 6 or 7 of chapter 35 or chapter 39 of Title 2C of the New Jersey Statutes regardless of whether the prior offenses have resulted in convictions.

The information contained in this report is a summary of responses from municipal police departments that participated in the 2001 and/or 2004 NJSP Gang Surveys. Survey responses reflect the observations and opinions of individual officers, and were not

¹ A-2171 (2004-2005 session), A-903 (2002-2003 session), A-3387 (2000-2001 session).

independently verified by New Jersey State Police personnel. It is hoped that the findings will enhance the collective understanding about the phenomenon of gangs in New Jersey, and will prompt discussion about solutions.

METHODOLOGY

2001 NJSP Gang Survey

Survey Design

In 2001, NJSP personnel developed a questionnaire that modeled the content and format of the National Youth Gang Center's (NYGC) annual survey, which has been administered nationwide since 1995 (see Appendix A for a copy of the 2001 NJSP Gang Survey). The decision to pose questions similar to those contained in the NYGC survey instrument allowed analysts to compare results from the NJSP survey with the data from the 1998 NYGC survey (the latest year for which complete data were available in 2001).

Survey Sample

For the 2001 survey, NJSP personnel selected 206 municipal law enforcement agencies to sample. The agencies were chosen because one or more of their personnel had attended NJSP sponsored gang awareness and recognition training. In an effort to maximize data consistency and completeness, the 2001 survey was administered as a telephone interview. Interviewers attempted to speak with the officer who attended training. When that was not possible, they spoke with a juvenile officer or other sworn member who was deemed knowledgeable on the subject of gangs. In addition to the municipal agency sample, county prosecutors offices and sheriffs departments in all 21 New Jersey counties were surveyed using a questionnaire that differed slightly.

Response Rate

Of the 206 agencies selected, officers from 195 police departments were contacted and interviewed (a response rate of nearly 95%). The remaining representatives did not return interviewers' phone calls. The respondents represented approximately 40% of all municipal agencies with full-time police forces. A complete list of respondents is found in Appendix B.

2004 NJSP Gang Survey

Survey Design

On the whole, the 2004 survey content resembled the 2001 NJSP Gang Survey. Most questions remained unchanged, or were only slightly modified by the addition of follow-up/clarification questions. The inclusion of the identically worded core questions allowed the analysis to focus on:

- identifying short-term trends developing in the gang environment
- conducting tracking analysis in municipalities that responded to both the 2001 and 2004 surveys